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ABSTRACT

The results of a survey on the opinions of the patrons of the Ruskin School District (Nebraska) regarding how they view school organization and what they would recommend regarding future considerations are reported. One hundred fifty questionnaires were mailed, and 111 responses were received. Findings are represented in six groups: (1) what patrons viewed as key factors for determining when a school district should reorganize; (2) perceptions of patrons regarding whether the district has reached a point when reorganization should be considered; (3) preference of patrons as to which district they would like to join if reorganization were to take place; (4) willingness of patrons to accept a two-thirds majority vote to join only one K-12 district if reorganization were to occur; (5) feelings of patrons regarding keeping the Ruskin Elementary School operating independently; and (6) types of comments given by patrons regarding school organization. Appended are survey and telephone interview questions. (SI)

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BULLETIN

RUSKIN SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY OF PATRON OPINIONS REGARDING SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

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RUSKIN SCHOOL DISTRICT
SURVEY OF PATRON OPINIONS REGARDING SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

Spring 1988

Survey Conducted by

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and
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The School Survey Project is a cooperative service under the guidance and supervision of educational leaders in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the State Department of Education. It seeks to provide not only the improvement of educational programs and school facilities in Nebraska but also to stimulate the insight and development of teachers, principals, and superintendents through their inservice experience. These services are advisory but we believe they are helpful and constructive to boards of education and all others concerned.

Each individual community surveyed receives expert guidance and counsel on its particular problems. Its experience then helps to give other communities and professional groups encouragement and insights into essential elements of educational progress and professional improvement. It is with this ideal in mind that the cooperative services between the Teachers College, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the State Department of Education have been established.

We hope that Nebraska communities will constantly avail themselves of these services. If carefully applied, the end result will be superior organization and physical facilities, as well as intelligent improvement of elementary and high school instruction, supervision, and administration. Our ultimate aim and end is to insure good, sound education in Nebraska.

James O'Hanlon
Dean of Teachers College
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Joe E. Lutjeharms
Commissioner of Education
State Department of Education

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RUSKIN SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY OF PATRON OPINIONS REGARDING SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Introduction

This report on the opinions of the patrons of the Ruskin School District regarding how they view school organization and what they would recommend regarding future considerations was requested by the Board of Education in the Ruskin School District and Ramon L. Mieth, Superintendent of Schools in the Ruskin School District. The Bureau of Education Research, Service and Policy Studies, has conducted a survey in which information was gathered by a mailed questionnaire and a follow-up telephone survey to gather information that could be used by school officials in the Ruskin School District in planning for the future.

The staff in the Bureau of Education Research, Service and Policy Studies (Bureau), has endeavored to put together a survey that will provide school officials with information so that when decisions are made by the Board of Education (Board), they will have the best possible information and thus be able to respond to the needs of the school community. The staff at the Bureau does not intend to make any decisions regarding the operation of the Ruskin School District (District). All decisions rest in the hands of the Board as prescribed by the State of Nebraska laws governing the operation of school districts.

Procedures Used to Conduct the Survey

Once it was agreed between the Board and the Bureau that the survey was to be conducted, the purpose for conducting the study was reviewed and clarified as Mr. Mieth, Superintendent of Schools, and a staff member from the Bureau reviewed the needs and interests of the Board. Options for conducting the study were considered. There were three approaches that were considered: (1) a mail questionnaire, (2) a telephone survey, and (3) a personal, or face-to-face interview with each patron in the District. Because the cost of conducting a phone or a personal interview would be so expensive, it was determined the mail questionnaire would be used. Previous surveys and established survey procedures have proven the survey technique to be satisfactory, so it was concluded the Board could be provided with valid and useful information through a mail survey and the

cost would not be prohibitive. Upon the completion of the information collection, however, a sample of the District patrons was drawn and a telephone survey conducted to verify that information that had been gathered through the mail. Consequently, in the final process, a combination mail and telephone survey was conducted.

The questions raised by Superintendent Mieth and the Board were reviewed in the Bureau and compared to the questions that were proposed by the Bureau staff. The list of questions was revised and then reviewed by the Board before they were translated into a survey instrument. Once the questions were put into the instrument, or the questionnaire format, they were returned to the Board for review. Following Board review the questionnaire was revised and the final draft in semi-final form returned for review by Superintendent Mieth and the Board. When final Board approval was given the questionnaire was printed.

A cover letter was prepared and after the signature of the Chairman of the Board was obtained, the letter was duplicated to be sent to each residence in the District with the questionnaire. Address labels were made available by the Superintendent of Schools in the Ruskin District.

The questionnaires were mailed to each resident patron in the District. (See Appendix A.) After approximately two weeks a follow-up letter was mailed to encourage those who had not responded to complete the questionnaire and return it. There were 150 questionnaires mailed, or all patron residents were mailed a questionnaire, and 111 were returned through the mail, for a total of an approximate 74 percent response rate. A 74 percent response is a very high rate of return for a survey of this type. It is not uncommon to get a return of approximately 50 percent and in community surveys when approximately half of the patrons respond it is considered acceptable. In this survey, in which there has been 74 percent of the patrons who responded by mail there can be a high level of confidence placed in the findings as being valid or an accurate reflection of the thinking of the patrons of the District.

To provide an added assurance that the information gathered was reflecting the thinking of the patrons, a sample of 30 names was drawn from the telephone directory in the District. Of the sample of 30 names, which was chosen by a random selection process, all were reached by phone except one. The 29 persons who were contacted by phone were used to simply provide a check against the information that was received through the mailed questionnaire. (For a copy of the questions asked in the telephone interview see Appendix B.) Of the 29 persons who were

interviewed on the telephone, 25 indicated they had sent in their completed questionnaires; four had not responded and answered the questions on the phone and thus the response rate increased from 74 percent up to 77 percent.

When all information had been received through the mail, it was tabulated and numbers and percentages figured to present the findings in such a way that it would be usable by the Board as they consider options and plan for the future of the District.

What the Patrons Say About School Organization

Item Number 1

The first question asked of patrons was what they felt were key factors, or criteria, that should enter into the thinking of the Board, that would justify considering the topic of school reorganization or consolidation. School reorganization as used in this survey refers to the possibility of forming some other form of district, joining with another district(s) or, it could involve keeping the local District and sharing services with other districts. Almost three fourths of the responses from patrons could be listed under the heading of (1) quality of education, (2) enrollment or size of the school, and (3) taxes or costs of operating the school. While quality, size and taxes constituted the predominant pattern of responses, there was approximately one-fourth of the responses that covered a number of items or criteria that were suggested by respondents for the Board to consider. When viewing the responses to this question, which are reported in Table 1, it is important to note that several of the 111 respondents listed more than one factor for consideration. Thus there were 137 separate responses given by the 111 responding patrons.

Table I

What Patrons of the Ruskin School District Viewed as Key Factors for Determining When a School District Should Reorganize

Key Factors	Number of Times a Patron Mentioned the Factor	Percentage
Quality	50	36.5
Enrollment	37	27.0
Taxes/Costs	15	10.9
Keep 7th/8th in one school	3	2.2
Community Unity	2	1.5
Consider What Majority Favors	2	1.5
Distance of Busing	2	1.5
Local Control	1	.7
Consider as a Last Resort	1	.7
Better Management	1	.7
Consider it when Things Go Bad	1	.7
No responses	22	16.1
Total Responses from 111 Respondents	137	100.0%

When giving consideration to the responses to the question, "What one key factor do you feel is the most important consideration or reason for determining when a school district should reorganize?" it is rather clear and understandable when patrons express an interest in "quality." Clearly, the patrons of the district have voiced a view that has placed quality as the primary or main factor to be considered. When looking at the factor labeled "enrollment" there seems to be a broader range of interpretations that can be given to this response. Enrollment can be viewed as having an influence on quality and at the same time it can be viewed as having an impact on costs. Patrons in the District, like taxpayers throughout the State, recognize that as enrollments decline, per pupil costs increase. Consequently, patrons and school officials ultimately face a decision about when the per pupil costs reach a point or a level of inefficiency that warrants closing a school. The other linkage of enrollment size ties to the topic of quality. The topic of quality and size is debated and there is no final answer to the debate. Some argue that there is some point below where class size loses some of its effectiveness because it is not possible to offer as much in the program and there is also an accompanying loss of quality because there is no competitive influence to encourage students. By contrast, there are arguments set forth suggesting that more individualized attention can be given pupils in smaller classes and that the graduates of very small schools have demonstrated they can go on and be highly competitive in future educational endeavors.

Some of the comments made by patrons regarding quality were: "The Ruskin School maintains quality by maintaining accreditation." "When we cannot compete in quality academics for our children [we should consider consolidation]." "if hiring and retaining top notch teachers would ever be a problem [we should consider consolidation]."

Some of the comments regarding enrollment or school size were: "When there are no more school age children living in our town." "When enrollment is too low, and therefore good education is jeopardized." When student enrollment is so low that it can no longer provide the competition needed among students in either scholastics or sports." "When we run out of kids [we should consider consolidation]."

Other comments made reflected still other views. For example, "When kids get to the 7th and 8th grade level they should be exposed to a larger variety of people, sports, problems, classes, and overall social development." When it seems apparent that the State will step in and place us where they please [we should consider consolidation]."

In summary, the patrons have expressed the view that their first criterion is quality, there second factor or criterion is enrollment size and the third consideration should be cost factors. The enrollment issue relates to both quality and to cost factors.

Item Number 2

Patrons were asked if they felt the Ruskin School District had reached a point when reorganization, or joining with another district, should be considered.

The majority (53%) of the responses indicated the people in the district did not feel the situation was one in which reorganization should be considered. While 53 percent is a simple majority, it is not an overwhelming view that leaves little or no room for debate. In the vernacular of the sports world, it may be likened to a split decision. While one in ten persons was unsure if reorganization should be considered at the present time, there were almost two-fifths of the patrons who acknowledged that consideration should be given to the topic at the present time.

Table 2

Perceptions of Patrons in the Ruskin School District
Regarding Whether the District has Reached
a Point When Reorganization Should
be Considered

Responses	Mail Questionnaire Number	Telephone Survey Number	Combined Percent
No	58	3	53
Yes	43	1	38
No Response	10	0	9
	111	4*	100

* There were four patrons who were contacted by phone who had not returned their questionnaires. Their responses are shown in the above four. The 25 patrons who where contacted by phone and who indicated they had responded to the questionnaire and returned their responses were already reflected in the 111 total.

Item Number 3

Patrons were also asked what district they would want to join, if reorganization were to occur. This question was posed for it was assumed that if reorganization were to occur, there would be some persons in the district that would want to join one neighboring district, while other patrons would indicate a preference for another district. Such information would be very important if the Board were to consider reorganization. Approximately half of the patrons (50.5%) indicated that Deshler would be the appropriate district to join and roughly 30 percent suggested that Nelson would be the preferred choice.

The questionnaire did not solicit the reasons why people would prefer to join one district in preference to another. Distance would be an obvious consideration while it is probable that a number of other factors could be listed as reasons for district preference.

The responses in the telephone survey were slightly different from those received in the mail, but the difference was not of a nature that reflected any major contradiction. Two of the four respondents over the telephone indicated Deshler would be their first recommendation, two said Nelson would be their first choice; also two gave a second view and said either Nelson or Deshler would be acceptable. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Preference of Patrons in the Ruskin District
for the District to Join If Reorganization
Were to Take Place

District Preferred	Number	Percent
Deshler	56	50.5
Nelson	34	30.6
Superior	6	5.4
Davenport	6	5.4
No Response	9	8.1
Total	111	100.0

Item Number 4

Patrons were asked: if two-thirds majority of the voters in the District were to vote to join one of the neighboring K-12 districts, other than the one you have indicated, would you be willing to accept such a proposal? The significant response pattern to this question was reflected in the 34 responses (30.6%) from persons who said they would not want to be bound by such a vote. The views and opinions, loyalties and feelings are of sufficient strength that it is unlikely trying to require a reorganization involving just one district would be acceptable even if reorganization were to be considered. Put another way, if reorganization were to be considered, to require all of the district to go to one neighboring K-12 district would make it less palatable that providing options for people to go to a district of their choice. (See Table 4.)

Table 4

Willingness of Ruskin District Patrons to Accept a Two-Thirds Majority Vote to Join only One K-12 District if Reorganization Were to Occur

Response	Number	Percent
Yes	64	57.7
No	34	30.6
No Response	13	11.7
	111	100.0

Item Number 5

Patrons of the District were asked what their views were about keeping the Ruskin Elementary School District operating independently as it has been. In Table 5 the responses are reported for the 111 persons who returned questionnaires and for the four persons interviewed on the telephone who indicated they had not returned the questionnaire. Roughly three fourths of the people in the district indicated they strongly supported or generally preferred keeping the Ruskin Elementary School operating as it has been. (See Table 5.)

Table 5

Feelings of Patrons of the Ruskin District Regarding Keeping the Ruskin Elementary School Operating Independently

Response	Number from Mail Questionnaire	Number from Telephone Survey	Percent
Strongly Support Keeping the School	64	0	55.7
Generally Prefer Keeping the School	21	4	21.7
Neither For or Against	3	0	2.6
Generally Opposed	6	0	5.2
Very Much Opposed to Keeping the School	15	0	13.0
No Response	2	0	1.7
Total	111	4	99.0

Comments and Suggestions

Respondents to the questionnaire were given an opportunity to provide comments and suggestions for the Board to consider. The totals and percentages are reported in Table 6 and comments that reflect the nature of the responses are listed following the table.

Table 6

Types of Comments Given by Patrons in the Ruskin School District Regarding School Organization

Response Category	Number Received in the Questionnaire	Number Received in Phone Survey	Percent
Let's keep the K-6, send 7th & 8th to one town	17	3	17.4
We have a good school	15	0	13.0
Consider distance	8	0	6.9
Concern for survival of town	6	1	6.1
We like individual attention	4	0	3.4
Concerns re. local Board issues	4	0	3.4
Need better management of $	2	0	1.7
Wait and see	2	0	1.7
No response	53	0	46.1
Total	111	4	99.7

The general tone of the responses is reflected in the comments listed below

"We have a good school and teachers. Let's keep them."

"All of the Ruskin students who have gone to other schools for one reason or another have really done well. They have rated very well in tests, contests, etc. Without the basic knowledge they received in Ruskin they wouldn't have been able to do so. In a small school there is also more opportunity for individualized help if needed."

"I think the kids that need extra attention have a better chance at a small school than at a large school where they're pushed through with the crowd."

"The Home, Church and School are important to our town. We need to keep our school!"

"If we don't keep our school as is, the rest of the town will not survive."

"If reorganization becomes the option, an attendance center in Ruskin for K-6 should be guaranteed."

Summary and Points to Consider

When summarizing the responses received, it is clear that the criteria considered most important are quality of education, the implications of enrollment, and cost factors

Slightly over half of the patrons feel that the Ruskin School District Board is not yet to a place where reorganization must be considered, while approximately two-fifths of the people support examining the issue.

If reorganization were to be considered, Deshler would be the district to which about half of the Ruskin patrons would suggest going and roughly 30 percent would vote to go to Nelson.

Responses not only reflected the view that various patrons would want to go to different districts, if reorganization were to occur, but it was also reported that while roughly two-thirds of the patrons would go along with a plan to move all of Ruskin to one neighboring district, another third would oppose such a move.

Over half of the patrons strongly support keeping the Ruskin School District as it is; another fifth would generally prefer keeping the District as it is as contrasted to approximately one fifth who would prefer consolidation.

The comments of the respondents followed the pattern of concern that has been found throughout the State of Nebraska concerning school consolidation. These comments, written in accompaniment with various items reflected concerns for quality, individualization, local control, taxes,

time on buses, and the loss of the community that is feared if there is a closing of a school attendance center. These concerns, as expressed by the patrons in the Ruskin School District, are the same concerns that were reported by a recent study done by Bartling.[1] The school is seen as more than a site where students gain instruction. It is viewed as a vital part of the life of the community and serves a broader purpose than education children.

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1. Sybouts, Ward and Bartling, Donal, *Rural School Board Presidents Look at School Reorganization,* Bureau of Education Research, Service and Policy Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1987.

APPENDIX A

RUSKIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

P.O. BOX 38 RUSKIN, NEBR. 68974 PH. 402-226-2491

May 31, 1988

Dear Patron:

The Ruskin School Board is confronted with the issue of school reorganization. Discussions among people in the district have raised questions about the advantages and disadvantages of reorganization. In an effort to get the views of patrons in the Ruskin School District, the Board of Education has asked personnel at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to conduct a survey. The intent of this survey is to gather information regarding your thoughts about school district reorganization so that the Ruskin School Board has the most accurate and complete information possible as we consider the issue of school reorganization. Please understand, the Board is not proposing reorganization at the present time.

You are being asked to take a few minutes to study the enclosed material and to complete a brief questionnaire. Please understand that your individual answers will be kept completely confidential. The staff at the University will receive your response and tabulate the results for us. The Board members will only see the report summarizing the results and will never see the individual responses.

It is very important that each questionnaire is completed and returned so that we will be assured of having an accurate view of how the patrons of the district see the question of school reorganization. The Board needs to know your thinking to be able to plan to meet the needs and wishes of the patrons of our district. So, please take the few minutes needed to fill out the questionnaire and return it in the self-addressed envelope. No postage is required.

With your cooperation this survey can provide valuable information for our Board of Education to use in our work. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Best Regards,

Enclosure

RUSKIN SCHOOL SURVEY

As indicated in the cover letter, your school board is interested in gathering information from you about how you see the issue of school reorganization. There are two items contained here for you to consider. First, there is some brief information about your school district and the surrounding districts. This information has been enclosed for you to review and it will, hopefully, provide you with some information that you may not have. The second part of this material is a questionnaire for you to respond to so that we can compile your thinking along with all the other persons in the Ruskin School District and be able to present an accurate view of what people see regarding the question of school organization. Please be assured that your response will be treated with complete confidentiality. It will never be possible for any person to know how you personally answered any of the questions. Your answers will be tallied with all other answers and summarized for the Board. In this way, complete confidentiality is assured. However, it is very important for us to have your answers to the questionnaire. The only way your School Board can have complete and accurate information is for you to help them by providing this information.

You should understand that this is a survey and not a ballot. Neither is this a call, or request, for school reorganization. The results of this study will be to provide the School Board with information so they can do the best and most informed job of planning for the needs of the District.

Please review the following information and then take a few minutes to check your answers to the questions. When you have completed answering the questions simply place the questionnaire in the enclosed envelope and put it in the mail. No stamp is needed.

Remember, the information you and your neighbors provide the Board of Education is important to them, to you, and to the children in your District. They want to know your thinking on this important topic and you can help them with their work by completing this questionnaire.

Background Information

To better enable you to understand some of the circumstances regarding school reorganization, you are being provided with some of the current facts regarding your school district and the four neighboring districts. You may be aware of this information, but in the event you are not, it is listed on the next page.

	SCHOOL DISTRICTS				
	RUSKIN	SUPERIOR	NELSON	DESHLER	DAVENPORT
Valuation	$13, 378,854	$74,110,072	$36,362,690	$55,168,041	$53,922,925
General Fund Levy	1.3260	1.6963	1.9117	1.5052	1.2565
Building Levy (Would not apply to mergers.)	.0647	.1801	.1205	.4899	.1024
Other Levies	.8775 (F.H.S.T.)	.0100 (Building Reserve)	None	None	.0281 (Building Reserve)
Total Levy	2.2682	1.8864	2.0322	1.9951	1.3870
1987-88 Operating Budget	$237,955	$2,098,152	$987,344	$1,109,660	$833,129
Enrollment	59 (K-8)	358 (K-6)	112 (K-6)	107 (K-6*)	62 (K-6*)
			*Does not include parochial students		
		306 (7-12)	113 (7-12)	134 (7-12)	58 (7-12)
Per Pupil Costs	$4,447.75 (K-8)	$2,574.21 (K-6)	$3,141.00 (K-6)	$4,579.29 (K-6)	$3,662.19 (K-6)
		$3,980.34 (7-12)	$4,887.00 (7-12)	$4,454.97 (7-12)	$7,762.90 (7-12)
Projected Building Needs Over the Next Ten Tears.	None	Sr. Hi. Track Improvement	Renovate old gym in elem. building.	None	None
Date When Building Bonds Will be Paid.	1989	Half in 1988 Half in 1995	1991	1996	1997

Current information available suggests there would be no immediate expansion or remodeling of facilities if reorganization occurred with any of the districts listed above.

Available information suggests there will be no major expenditures required for asbestos removal in any of the facilities in the districts listed.

Survey Questions

Realizing this is a non-binding survey which is only to provide information for the Ruskin School Board, check the spaces below, or fill in the needed information, to indicate your preference for each item.

1. What one key factor do you feel is the most important consideration or reason for determining when a school district should reorganize?

_____

_____

2. Do you feel the Ruskin School District has reached a point when reorganizing, or joining with another district, should be considered?

[____] Yes [____] No

3. If reorganization were to take place, which district would you want to join?

[____] Superior School District

[____] Nelson School District

[____] Davenport School District

[____] Deshler School District

4. If a two-thirds majority of the voters in the Ruskin School District were to vote to join <u>one</u> of the neighboring K-12 school districts, other than the one you have indicated in Question 3, would you be willing to accept such a proposal?

[____] Yes [____] No

Please turn page.

5. What is your feeling about keeping the Ruskin Elementary School District operating independently as it now is? (Check one response.)

[__] I strongly support keeping our school organized as it is.

[__] I generally prefer keeping our school organized as it is.

[__] I am neither for or against keeping our school as it is.

[__] I would generally be opposed to keeping the Ruskin Elementary School organized as it is.

[__] I am very much opposed to keeping our school the way it is organized.

6. Comments or suggestions _____

_____

Please place the questionnaire in the enclosed envelope and return it to:

Bureau of Research and Educational Services
Room 1204 Seaton Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588-0638

June 23, 1988

Dear Patron of the Ruskin School District,

A short time ago you received a letter from LaVeryl Kleen, Chairman of the Board of Education, in which you were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. The reason for asking you to fill out this short questionnaire was to get your view on the organization of the Ruskin School District. The board of education in your district was asking for this information so that they would have the best possible information in representing you as they consider how to best face the issues that lie ahead.

Any information that is provided by you will be treated with complete confidentiality. That is one of the reasons an agency that specializes in gathering such information was asked to help the board of education with this task. So please be assured that your answer will not be revealed to any person. The board of education will only see a summary of the results which will show how many persons responded to each of the various categories on the questionnaire. This summary is important to the board members, for it will provide them with better information than they now have regarding the collective views of people in the Ruskin School District.

If you have completed and returned the questionnaire that was sent to you, please disregard this letter and accept our thanks for your earlier response. If you have not yet completed the questionnaire, you will find another copy enclosed. Would you please look over the items and take the few minutes needed to complete it, place it in the enclosed envelope and drop it in the mail. No postage is needed. Your response will provide needed information to the board of education.

Very truly yours,

Ward Sybouts, Director
Bureau of Education Research and
Field Studies

14-F

APPENDIX B

Telephone Interview

Hello (Introduction of who was calling and why.)

Did you receive the questionnaire in the mail?

If "Yes," did you have an opportunity to complete and return the questionnaire?

If "Yes," thank you for your cooperation. Your input will be of value to the board, etc.

If "No," do you think the Board should consider reorganization?

With what district do you think Ruskin should, if needed, reorganize?

Would you go along with a 2/3 majority vote to go to one district?

How do you feel about reorganization?

- Strongly oppose
- Generally oppose
- Could go either way
- Would generally support
- Would strongly support

Do you have children in the Ruskin School?

Ask for comments.